Review

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As early as 1934 the legendary Lincoln scholar James G. Randall, in a well-known article, asked, “Has the Lincoln theme been exhausted?” He noted the many then unexplored fields of unedited works, the topics and the themes that had not been examined, and concluded optimistically that, despite a list of some three thousand works at that time, great progress was still possible in the field of Lincoln studies. Others who followed were not as sanguine. In an essay written in 1960 during the centennial celebration of Lincoln’s election, one scholar said wryly, “We know more about Lincoln’s day-to-day activity than he knew; we know more about his family and his ancestors than he knew. Some of our scholars know more about the details of his life than they know of their own.”

This acerbic view notwithstanding, in the great pantheon of Lincoln literature—now in excess of 16,500 volumes—one largely neglected area is the relationship of Lincoln and the immigrant. Donald Allendorf has taken a slice of this subject and produced a sound study of Lincoln’s friendship with the prominent German immigrant Gustave Koerner.

Friends and friendship were always very important to Abraham Lincoln, and Lincoln’s relationship with Koerner was no different. “The better part of one’s life consists of his friendships,” Lincoln wrote to Joseph Gillespie in 1849. Earlier, Lincoln told William Butler, “I am willing to pledge myself in black and white to cut my throat from ear


2. For the first full-length study on this topic see my volume in the Concise Lincoln Library series, Lincoln and the Immigrant (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015).
to ear, if, when I meet you, you shall seriously say, that you believe me capable of betraying my friends for any price.” And, later, President Lincoln wrote Secretary of State William H. Seward, “The loss of enemies does not compensate for the loss of friends.”

It was this fierce loyalty to his friends that made Gustave Koerner one of Lincoln’s most trusted and reliable friends. Indeed, Koerner became Lincoln’s bellwether for the German American community and established himself as an invaluable friend and political ally. Lincoln recognized and respected that fact.

Both men opposed slavery and believed in a free America. But they could not have come from more different backgrounds. “They were born in the same year, 1809,” Allendorf begins, “one to a pioneering, hardscrabble farm couple: an illiterate mother and a father who could only write his name, looking for a new land deep in the wilderness of Kentucky; the other to a wealthy and politically connected family in a cultural and commercial center across an ocean some five thousand miles away.” In courtrooms across frontier Illinois they came to know one another. “One had earned his passage into law from his candlelit academy of books read in a log-chinked cabin, on a store countertop, on a prairie hillside; the other from great universities. One would become president of the United States. The other would help him get there. To the final rest, the immigrant newcomer, turned pallbearer, would escort his friend’s body to the tomb” (11).

And so Allendorf begins his study of the role that Koerner played in Lincoln’s career. Much of what Allendorf writes about Lincoln is not new, but the significance of his work rests more on the much needed introduction of the German-born immigrant’s contributions as a lawyer and politician. Too, as many people, native and immigrant alike, were jockeying for proximity to Lincoln as he rose in stature and prominence, Allendorf’s Koerner occupies a unique and memorable place in Lincoln’s world.

In many ways, the friendship of Lincoln and Koerner was an odd-couple one of sorts. If Lincoln was a common man who rose to power, Koerner was far from ever being a common man. “Their backgrounds and upbringings were incomprehensible to the other except for one shared belief,” writes Allendorf, “a belief in personal liberty for all, regardless of race or place of birth, a liberty unencumbered by

government, of a union of that government that served the will of all
the people, not of just a few” (27).

Born in Frankfurt-am-Main, Koerner studied law at three German
universities—eventually receiving his doctorate and pursuing a legal
career in Frankfurt. However, Koerner did not remain in Germany
long enough to enjoy any success in his chosen career due to his par-
ticipation in revolutionary politics. German nationalism and democ-
ratric politics were the constant staples of conversation in the Koerner
household, so it was no surprise that Gustave, named for the Swedish
king who opposed Napoleon, would be involved in radical student
organizations when he entered university.

Koerner led a minor revolt in 1833, the Frankfurt Attentat, designed
to foment a general revolution against the autocratic regimes of the
divided German states. It failed, as did a number of other ill-fated
such efforts, and Koerner, expecting arrest and imprisonment, was
smuggled out of town in women’s clothing by his sister.

Although reluctant to leave his family, Koerner realized that he
could never be an effective revolutionary in Germany now that his
identity was known to the government. The exile settled in southern
Illinois, just a few years after Lincoln moved to the state in 1831. To
learn English and the American legal system, Koerner studied law
for a year in the United States before taking up practice in Belleville,
Illinois.4 Arriving earlier than the Forty-Eighters—the refugees of the
German Revolutions of 1848—provided Koerner with an advantage.
Very quickly in Belleville he established himself as an active and ambi-
tious young man. He wrote for German American newspapers and
immersed himself in Democratic politics—successfully running for
the Illinois state legislature in 1842 and thereby becoming the first
German to serve there. He then went on to serve as a justice on the
state supreme court from 1845 to 1848 and as lieutenant governor
from 1853 to 1857.

In many ways, Koerner was the single most important German
Lincoln ever befriended. Although he entered Lincoln’s world in June
of 1835, when he rode the sixty-five miles from Belleville to Vandalia
for his Illinois bar examination, the first time he wrote about Lincoln
was five years later when the Democratic stronghold of Belleville

4. Koerner’s memoirs, written later in his life and on which a good deal of this book
is based, is a formidable 1,440 pages. See Thomas J. McCormack, ed., Memoirs of Gustave
Koerner, 1809–1896: Life-Sketches Written at the Suggestion of His Children, 2 vols. (Cedar
Rapids, Iowa: Torch, 1909). In the course of my work on Lincoln and the immigrant,
I found that Koerner’s memoirs are perhaps among the most comprehensive sources
for information about the German population and politics in Lincoln’s era.
was invaded by the Whigs during the Log Cabin Campaign of 1840. Accompanying the Whigs at that time was Lincoln, stumping for presidential candidate William Henry Harrison. The crowd was small, observed Koerner, and “no doubt this disappointment had its effect upon Mr. Lincoln, who seemed rather depressed and was less happy in his remarks than usual. He sought to make much of the point that he had seen in Belleville that morning a fine horse sold by a constable for the price of twenty-seven dollars, all due to the hard times produced by the Democrats. He was somewhat nonplussed by the constable, who was in the crowd, crying out that the horse had but one eye.” Koerner could not remember how Lincoln “got out of this scrape,” but he did recall that “no one in the crowd would have dreamed that he was one day to be their President” (112–13).

Obviously, Koerner’s first impression of Lincoln as a speaker was not particularly favorable. Seeing Lincoln give that stump speech in Belleville, Koerner observed, “It must be said that his appearance was not pre-possessing. His exceedingly tall and angular form made his movements rather awkward. Nor were his features, when he was not animated, pleasant, owing principally to his high cheek-bones. His complexion had no roseate hue of health, but was then rather bilious, and when not speaking, his face seemed to be overshadowed by melancholy thoughts. I observed him closely, thought I saw a good deal of intellect in him, while his looks were genial and kind. I did not believe he had much reserve will-power.”

Koerner would soon come to change his opinion about Lincoln’s willpower. Lincoln and Koerner crossed paths many times after the German became an Illinois Supreme Court judge in 1845. Lincoln argued several cases before Koerner over the next three years, and the German immigrant observed that the court “always admired [Lincoln’s] extreme fairness in stating his adversary’s case as well as his own, and the often quaint and droll language used by him.” When Lincoln returned to Belleville in 1856 to campaign for John C. Frémont, Koerner remembered Lincoln “spoke in an almost conversational tone, but with such earnestness and such deep feeling upon the question of the day that he struck the hearts of all his hearers. Referring to the fact that here, as well as in other places where he had spoken, he had found the Germans more enthusiastic for the cause of freedom than all other nationalities, he, almost with tears in his eyes, broke out in the words: ‘God bless the Dutch.’ Everybody felt that he said this in the simplicity of his heart, using the familiar name of Dutch as the

Americans do when amongst themselves. A smart politician would not have failed to say ‘Germans.’ But no one took offense” (184–85).

A staunch antislavery advocate, Koerner became disenchanted with the Democratic Party in the 1850s as it gravitated toward Stephen Douglas’s popular sovereignty solution to the growing sectional discord in America over slavery. In a widely published letter to the Republican state central committee, Koerner stated that, if he joined the new Republican Party, it would have to support the philosophy that “all American citizens without distinction of birth and religion should be entitled to rule America” and naturalization laws “should not be modified in an illiberal spirit.” Lincoln was moved by this sentiment and used his influence to persuade his fellow Republicans to approve a resolution vowing to “proscribe no one, by legislation or otherwise, on account of religious opinions, or in consequence of place of birth.” With Lincoln’s support, the Illinois Republicans also nominated a German, Francis A. Hoffman of Chicago, as its candidate for lieutenant governor.

The Know-Nothings may have lost out on the resolution debates, but their widely noted presence within the new Republican organizations placed the immigrant question at the center of the 1856 political campaigns in Illinois and the Midwest. Know-Nothing successes in elections, both local and national, were mixed at best. Still they achieved enough to startle those who found their platforms frightening. When Lincoln ran against Stephen Douglas in 1858 for U.S. Senate, he was sufficiently concerned about nativism to write his old friend and ally, Koerner. “I learn we are in great danger in Madison,” Lincoln wrote. “It is said half the Americans [Know-Nothings] are going for Douglas; and that slam will ruin us if not counteracted . . . . We must make a special job of Madison. Every edge must be made to cut. Can not you, [Theodore] Canisius, and some other influential Germans set a plan on foot that shall gain us accession from the Germans, and see that, at the election, none are cheated in their ballots? [Representative Joseph] Gillespie thinks that thing is sometimes practiced on the German in Madison . . . . Nothing must be left undone.” Koerner was sufficiently impressed to reply to his German brethren, “We must make them understand Lincoln is our man.”

Thus began the greatest role Koerner would serve Lincoln: he continually vouched for Lincoln to German Americans. At the 1860 Republican convention in Chicago, Koerner was one of the Lincoln managers who kept him in contention for the nomination. On the

6. Silverman, Lincoln and the Immigrant, 64.
second day of the convention, Koerner spoke to the Indiana delegation and helped persuade them to swing their votes to Lincoln, securing him both the Illinois and Indiana votes and a solid second place to William Seward on the first ballot. “I would tell this meeting in all candor,” Koerner recalled, “that if [Missourian Edward] Bates was nominated, the German Republicans in other States Would never vote for him; I, for one, would not, and I would advise my countrymen to the same effect” (286). Bates, who eventually became Lincoln’s attorney general, had entered the convention as one of the frontrunners and would later blame his defeat on Koerner’s speech before the Indiana and Pennsylvania delegations.

The political machinations and deals being made behind the scenes at the Republican convention made Lincoln fidgety. Lincoln spent his time “in the vacant lot between his law office and the office of the Illinois State Journal, ‘nervous, restless, and laboring under more or less suppressed excitement,’ alternately playing a kind of handball with others in the lot and dropping in on another lawyer’s office of the second floor above Chatterton’s jewelry shop and the telegraph office, wherever he might pick up the latest from Chicago” (298).

Koerner feared that, if Lincoln broke with protocol and showed up at the convention, which he was itching to do, it would be a serious political mistake. Lincoln would be perceived as being complicit in the backroom negotiations that were being done in his name and, if charges of corruption were ever lodged, Lincoln would be incriminated by association. To forestall this possibility, Koerner sent his perhaps most famous correspondence, a telegram, to Lincoln stating simply, bluntly, and entirely, “Don’t come here.” Tellingly, in his massive memoirs, Koerner makes no mention of this telegram sent the morning of the most dramatic day of the convention, perhaps because he would have had to provide context and the circumstances that encouraged him to send it; something he apparently was not willing to do (298–99).

Besides assisting in obtaining the presidential nomination for Lincoln, Koerner also helped draft the Republican Party platform on which Lincoln ran. One key element in the platform was the work of Koerner and his German colleagues. Declaration of principle 14 states:

“That the Republican Party is opposed to any change in our naturalization laws or any state legislation by which the rights of citizens hitherto accorded to immigrants from foreign lands shall be abridged or impaired; and in favor of giving a full and efficient protection to the rights of all classes of citizens, whether native or naturalized, both at home and abroad.” This statement proved critical to recruiting German American support for Lincoln’s candidacy and the Republican Party.

After the campaign, Koerner was one of the confidants Lincoln consulted about possible appointments in the new administration. Indeed, Lincoln even visited Koerner in his hotel room to discuss matters. But, like several other political associates of Lincoln, Koerner was deeply disappointed and embarrassed that he was not appointed to a significant position by the president-elect. Koerner and many others in the German American community assumed he would be appointed minister to Berlin, but Lincoln instead chose his friend Norman Judd for the post.

Koerner was devastated. “[I] have worked very hard in my profession,” he wrote Lincoln,

My health has been greatly shattered by the 3 terrible last campaigns where I acted one day as General, the next as private. I desired repose. Young active Germans, of merits, undoubtedly, but not half as well known to the Germans of the United States, and who had great prospects before them at home in the sphere, in which they excel were favored in missions. I stood disgraced in the eyes of others, not in my own. I had done nothing to forfeit your friendship and the regard you have always shown me. I think my quiet and unobtrusive manner has not lowered me in your estimation. I know I could not have pressed my claims on your attention for all the world. (315)8

Koerner finally did secure a diplomatic post the following year—replacing fellow German American Carl Schurz as minister to Spain. Throughout the remainder of his life, Lincoln looked to Koerner as his unofficial liaison to the nation’s German American community. Deeply believing in the same causes, the two remained friends and, according to Allendorf, maintained a “close relationship, even a personal relationship” to such an extent that Koerner was a pallbearer

8. See also Gustave Koerner to Abraham Lincoln, April 5, 1861, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington.
at Lincoln’s funeral, the only person so honored who was not from Springfield (243).

Writing to one of his generals during the Civil War, Lincoln described Koerner as “an educated and talented German gentleman, as true a man as lives. With his assistance you can set everything right with the Germans.”9 Until now, however, no one has deeply explored the friendship between Lincoln and Koerner. In this regard, Donald Allendorf has produced a volume that will educate and edify scholars and history buffs alike.

Yet this volume is not without its flaws. Factual errors have crept in and, at times, distract. The Wilmot Proviso did not win Congressional approval, as Allendorf states. Lincoln and Joshua Speed were not law partners, and even Lincoln’s home address in Springfield is mistaken! Too much significance is made of Lincoln’s transition from ending his letters to Koerner “Very truly yours,” early on in their relationship, to “Your friend as ever,” which, of course, becomes the title of this book. And speaking of such, while it is important to explore the largely neglected area of Lincoln’s relationship with immigrants, so too, is it hyperbole and a stretch to say that the Lincoln-Koerner friendship “changed America.” It was important, yes, and surely deserves the attention this book provides, but any of student of Lincoln knows he kept his cards close to his chest and did a pretty good job changing the United States by, more often than not, keeping his own counsel.

These caveats aside, this book does contribute to the great volume of Lincoln literature by demonstrating just how important friends like Koerner were to Lincoln’s life and career. By doing so, this is a good read.